(continued from the August Issue)

Everybody's All-American

Plenty of hurdles in assessing the real Jim Thorpe

by Beau Adams *(Printed by permission This Land Press)*

One of the persistent tropes on Thorpe is that he was a no-good runaway until he found his way to the world of sport. While it may be so that he left Carlisle and previous Indian schools for periods of a time, this was hardly a novelty.

"They all ran away from school," claims Lenhart, "For instance, we know that thousands of students attended Carlisle, but less than 8 percent graduated." This was a school that would eventually be shut down relative to a scandal involving the abuse of its students. In 1914, a federal investigation in by the Department of the Interior charged that Carlisle had become a "cesspool of deceit, cruelty, and deprivation." As a result, the school would permanently close in 1918, its facilities claimed by the United States Army to be used as a medical treatment facility for World War I casualties.

The Carlisle curriculum was an attempt to "civilize" young Indians once they had been physically separated from their families. They were forced to cut their hair, remove their piercings and change their wardrobe. They weren't allowed to speak in their native languages or participate in traditional tribal games.

"At Carlisle, they had the outing system and that didn't sit well with Jim," Lenhart says. "It was rough; it was basically organized indentured servitude. The idea was that you were supposed to teach these kids a skill, whether it was farming or housekeeping or whatever, but in reality it was just cheap labor."

But Thorpe didn't leave because of poor treatment. In fact, as a star athlete, he was likely treated better than most. He left to play minor league baseball and make some money—a decision that would eventually stain his amateur career.

Prior to one of his breaks from Carlisle in 1909, Thorpe had had success not only in football but also as a track and field athlete. But the record of his Carlisle career is sensational at best.

In 1907, while attending Carlisle, Thorpe met famed coach Glenn Scobey "Pop" Warner. The story is told as if Thorpe was just wandering around the school grounds and happened upon the track and field tryouts. Dressed in overalls and a borrowed pair of shoes, Thorpe completed a high jump that set a new school record, clearing the bar "without effort." Upon hearing the news of this feat, Warner catches up with Thorpe the next day and offers him a spot on the track team.

Kate Buford, whose biography Native American Son: The Life and Sporting Legend of Jim Thorpe is an honest attempt at telling Thorpe's life story minus the tall tales, is dubious of this episode. Warner himself often noted that, "in his many retellings of this and other Thorpe stories, truth and embellishment were tightly interwoven."

"He probably went to an open tryout," Lenhart says. "Whether it had been announced in the school paper or just by word of mouth, the educated guess is that he was there to tryout for a spot, he wasn't just kicking a can by the side of the road and then decided to go and interrupt a school sanctioned practice and clear a bar that was over five feet tall."

Another persistent myth is that Thorpe never had to train or even exert much effort to beat his opponents. Dwight Eisenhower, who had played against Thorpe's Carlisle football squad while attending West Point once said, "Here and there, there are some people who are supremely endowed. My memory goes back to Jim Thorpe. He never practiced in his life, and he could do anything better than any other football player I ever saw."

"That's all garbage," says Lenhart. "He was a great athlete but he was also a human being—he wasn't a superhero."

Still, the stories persist. One of the more famous myths about Thorpe is his lack of training time while aboard the SS Finland, the vessel that would transport the American Olympic team to Stockholm for the Fifth Olympiad, where Thorpe would win gold medals in both the pentathlon and decathlon events.

"They talk about how when he was on the boat that he slept and he lived a life of leisure for the two weeks going to Sweden. That's totally false," maintains Lenhart. "They completely renovated that boat—it was a floating gym. They had athletic fields on the decks, they had tracks on the decks, and they had weight rooms and swimming pools and bikes all over the ship. It was built for the sole purpose of training athletes during that two week voyage."

All the athletes on that boat were required to report twice daily to trainer Michael Murphy, and there was no record of Thorpe missing those practices. Both Ralph Craig, a sprinter in the 1912 games, and Avery Brundage, a fierce competitor of Thorpe's who would later serve as the president of the International Olympic Committee for 20 years, offered testimony to the contrary—but the press at the time seemed more interested in advancing it's own story.

Additionally it is reported that when the American athletes finally reached Europe, the rigorous training and the "professionalism" of the United States team upset both the British and the French squads. In 1912, coming out of the Victorian era, the European teams were clinging to the ideal that an amateur athlete was a wealthy person of leisure with casual athletic prowess, not someone who trained to win. It is perhaps a cool irony that as Thorpe's countrymen were relaying his apathy towards training, his rivals were criticizing him and his teammates for their workmanlike attitudes toward sport.

Perhaps the most famous of Thorpe tall tales occurs at the 1912 Olympics at Stockholm, when King Gustav V of Sweden is noted to have addressed Thorpe at a medal ceremony by saying, "You, sir, are the most wonderful athlete in the world," to which Thorpe's reported reply was a simple, "Thanks, King."

Buford shoots this story full of holes. "It would be claimed," she writes, "that Jim replied, 'Thanks, King,' as if he knew no better, the story undermining the moment of his greatest triumph." She argues that, "A flippant reply would have been out of character for a man who was highly uncomfortable in public ceremonies and hated to stand out." Movie footage of the event shows Thorpe accepting the award, taking a step back, making a bowing motion to the King and then rejoining his teammates.

This folk tale grows more ludicrous when you take into account the events that occurred aboard the Finland. "The American athletes weren't necessarily men of leisure or from upper-class backgrounds," Lenhart notes. The American Olympic team was comprised of three Native Americans, an African-American sprinter, some policemen, mechanics, clerks, and several Hawaiian swimmers. "I am sure some of them were men of means, but most of them were working-class guys. So part of their training when they were onboard the ship en route to Sweden was a sort of etiquette course. Thorpe knew what to say and how to act."

The premier college athletes of that era played minor league baseball in the summer, to keep out of trouble, stay in decent shape, and earn a little spending money. At the time, baseball and boxing were about the only sports in which you could earn a paycheck. As a college athlete, as long as you didn't use your real name, you could come back to school the next year and compete as an amateur.

Although Thorpe would publicly deny any understanding of the rules governing amateur status, it was clear that he and many others were routinely being paid to play summer-league baseball. The reporting of this fact would ultimately be the undoing of Thorpe's amateur career and would leave him stripped of his Olympic medals, his accomplishments stricken from record. It would be a public humiliation that would not be rectified until many years after Thorpe's death.

If you're looking for a villain in this scenario, there are two: Thorpe's amateur coach, Glenn "Pop" Warner, and James Sullivan, then president of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). These men were aware of the "summer jobs" their amateur athletes were involved in—Warner would have likely made the connection between the athlete and the minor league baseball manager—and they could not let on that they had ever been aware of such transgression. They needed a scapegoat.

Buford writes, "It was no doubt an interesting meeting between two extremely ambitious men who had worked hard to create their places within the new sports hierarchy, now together saving themselves by hanging Jim out to dry." Thorpe must confess, in other words, and bring down no one else with him.

As an added humiliation, Warner had written Thorpe's letter detailing his admission of guilt to the AAU and insisted Thorpe sign it. In it, he portrays Thorpe as a simpleton, no doubt adding to the misinformation. In the admission, Warner speaking as Thorpe, pens the regretful words, "I was not very wise to the ways of the world and did not realize this was wrong … I was simply an Indian schoolboy and did not know about all such things."

Thorpe may have lost his Olympic hardware and his amateur status, but as far as the public was concerned, he was still a hero.

In his indictment, Thorpe was asked to name others who had violated the code of amateurism as he had done by playing minor league baseball. He refused. The Daily Oklahoman reported that his refusal to turn on his fellow athletes had garnered him great respect: "Throughout the length and breadth of America … only sympathy and praise for the Indian is heard."

Other publications took the opportunity to criticize not only the fallacy of amateurism but also to note the toll the episode had taken on the greatest athlete in the world. The editors of Baseball Magazine wrote:

"[T]he Indian experienced a more complete and utter reversal of fortune than has fallen to the lot of any other athlete. From the very pinnacle of glory, gained by his unparalleled achievements, he saw himself suddenly hurled beyond the pale … From first to last he has been merely a pawn in the game … His trophies so well won are snatched away; his exploits are erased from the record book as though they did not exist; he is forever barred from further competition in the very lines of sport in which he is acknowledged as the master of all time."

The Los Angeles Times rightly claimed that the AAU knew full well that its amateurs were competing professionally in various leagues and goes on to refer to Sullivan as a, "pompous little insect."

Public opinion notwithstanding, Thorpe was now considered a professional athlete and would have to make a living playing professional baseball. The rest of the world would never have the chance to witness the greatest athlete who had ever lived compete at another Olympic event.

The Oklahoma Historical Society lists the historical marker for "Jim Thorpe Birthplace No. 1" as being located at 706 E. Boston Ave. in Yale, Oklahoma. Although Thorpe certainly owned the home at the address in Yale, he was definitely not born there. In fact, Yale's claim to Thorpe is tenuous at best. Records show that he lived there from 1917 until 1923. He bought the house (now one of many Jim Thorpe museums) after he signed a contract with the New York Giants baseball franchise—a period in which he was playing not only major league baseball in New York, but also professional football in Ohio during baseball's offseason. Although there are many stories of Yale locals spending time with Thorpe, his first wife, Iva, who lived with him in that house, divorced him on grounds of desertion.

The Oklahoma Sports Museum in downtown Guthrie occupies a space toward the end of a row of tidy brick buildings. Its forest-green awnings with gold, frontier-inspired font screams for an update.

As I entered the cavernous space, the only light filtering through the storefront windows, a voice from the abyss asked somewhat accusingly, "Can I help you?"

"Um, yeah," I replied to the darkness, "isn't this a museum?"

"Yes it is," said a woman coming slowly through the light. She was older and the harshness of her voice belied her gentle, grandmotherly countenance. "Anything in particular you're looking for?"

"Jim Thorpe," I said, "I am looking for Jim Thorpe memorabilia."

"Well, I'll have to turn the light on back there," she seemed slightly put out.

"Thanks," I said as I moved toward the back corner of the building where the fluorescent fixtures she had activated were warming up.

"You know," she said, now positioned in a chair at the reception desk behind me and to the right, "we accept donations." She peered at me over her reading glasses, paperback in one hand leaving the other free to accept my money.

"Oh, sure," I said and fumbled for my wallet to find her some cash.

The left side of the building now properly illuminated, I was directed toward a narrow hallway and corner dedicated primarily to Thorpe.

"We honor Indians in this museum," she said. I couldn't tell if she meant it as an indictment or a slur. Moving through some of the newer exhibits featuring cardboard cutouts of Barry Sanders and airbrushed portraits of Blake Griffin, I made my way to Thorpe's domain. Most of the ephemera assigned to Thorpe happen to be in photo form. Either that, or newspaper and magazine articles written about him enlarged and fixed to wood or poster board, presumably for the purpose of proper display. After perusing several photos and reading a few articles on Thorpe, Allie Reynolds and Moses Yellow Horse, I decide that as interesting as this place may be, its riches on Thorpe are limited.

As I begin to make my way to the front door, I notice a small bookshelf. At the base of the shelf, totally out in the open, lies an ancient pair of track and field cleats intimately placed near a photo of Thorpe competing in the fifth Olympiad. I shout toward the front of the museum where my curator is sitting reading a book.

"Are these Jim Thorpe's actual cleats? The ones he wore in the Olympics?"

"I doubt it," the woman says. "They're probably just a replica. You know, so you can get an idea of what it would have been like for him."